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ABSTRACT

Being a teacher of writing carries certain ideological implications, not the least of which is the fact that the teacher must participate in and perpetuate an educational system which works effects in and upon society that are repugnant. Overall, teachers work to maintain a status quo that shrugs its shoulders at many inequalities and injustices of race, gender, class, etc. As a group, writing instructors are highly idealistic people, allowing them to continue to strive even in conditions as they now stand. The goal of writing instruction, "literacy," is itself embedded in ideology, so that no single conception of "literacy" serves all cultural groups. Accordingly, when monolithic conceptions of education remain unquestioned, it is discouraging, if not downright frightening. Theories embracing the notion of "discourse conventions," such as that of David Bartholomae, actually encourage students to submit to existing social and political power relationships, and betray elitist and sexist stances. In contrast to the "discourse conventions" position are stances which acknowledge the "discussion of difference" in constructive ways, such as Donald Murray's emphasis on personal codes and the autobiographical nature of all writing. As Nancy Sommers has contended, the kinds of writing that students are encouraged to produce has been artificially limited, largely through the oppressive nature of contemporary institutions. Thus teachers must value students' purposes, perspectives, and texts if they hope to convince them to value the texts of others. (HB)

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Valuing Student Texts/Students Valuing Texts

This paper will say nothing new. Perhaps some of you would like to escape now -- but if you exercise patience my colleagues will provide you with more originality in a few minutes. Though I will say nothing new, I proposed this paper last year, and I'm reading it to you now, because -- for me, in my attempts to teach writing -- there are lessons I need to hear over and over, lessons, in fact, which I need to re-member (to put together in my mind and emotions), to rediscover again and again with virtually every group of students.

This is a paper about the ideological implications of what we do -- as writing instructors, as English teachers, as members of large (public) institutions. Clearly, I cannot deal with even a small sub-topic of such implications thoroughly within the time constraints of this conference. However, I will offer some questions which can serve as a plumb-line in the construction of the various pedagogical practices our professional roles call upon us to fashion. I am speaking on my musings about such ideological implications for a number of reasons, reasons that are complicated inter-related reflections of my own situatedness or, to use Barbara Herrnstein Smith's words, my own contingencies. But, at the bottom line (and here I must note with regret my adoption of such an economic, utilitarian metaphor), at bottom the single reason I would

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bring to your attention is worry. Worry that what we do to students is NOT what I would chose to do, not what I have spent many years attempting to learn how to do: that my participation in the American educational system boils down to perpetuating the system for its own sake, to perpetuating a system which (though, of course, it has many complex, and often competing goals) largely works effects in and upon society that are repugnant to me: individuals are shaped to fit into social and economic machinery, groups are equipped to enjoy privilege or NOT. Overall, we work to maintain a status quo that shrugs its shoulders at many inequities and injustices of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and so on.

Let me hasten to say I see this situation as immensely complex. If my above accusation were all there is to the educational system, or to my university in particular, then the solution would be simple -- at least for me, personally, if not for society as a whole. I would have to find another way to make a living. But, of course, the dark "truths" about our institutions are not the entire story any more than the terrible injustices of our present society are all there is to say about ourselves. As a group (which is always a lead-in to an over-simplification, a stereotype) writing teachers are among the most idealistic people in the world -- why else would we accept the vagaries of our terms of employment? -- and so I count myself proud to be among you, and, at the same time, I feel compelled to keep on asking: what the heck are we doing?

Such questions are necessarily grounded in particular locations. Reading and writing are always done by people, individually or in groups, who are enmeshed in particular

circumstances. Despite the fact that many people would still cling to what Ruth Finnegan and Harvey Graff, among others, have termed "literacy myths" -- that literacy *per se* brings "vague but powerful concomitants and effects" (Graff, 16) which in turn justify institutional structures and political agendas -- ". . . literacy in the abstract is meaningless" (Graff, 23). The means and ends of educational practices designed to foster varieties of "literacy" must always be seen in as full a context as possible. People read and write texts for specific purposes; for different specific purposes other people are (perhaps) prevented from participating in those same social acts. Along with Brian Street, "I . . . contend that what the particular practices and concepts of reading and writing are for a given society depends upon the context, [and] that they are already embedded in an ideology and cannot be isolated or treated as 'neutral' or merely 'technical'" (1). This embedded nature of literacy acts and literacy education becomes increasingly evident by even a quick perusal of literacy research being carried out in particular locations within American society today. For example, Luis C. Moll's work with Latino elementary school children in the Southwest, John U. Ogbu's work in urban California, and Ron Scollon's research with Athabaskan Natives all deal with widely different social/political/psychological circumstances, and at least one implication of such a comparison is that no single educational method, no single conception of "literacy" or of "composition," will serve these different people. Ron Scollon, for instance, told me in conversation that his work with the Athabaskans has led him to the moral conviction that he should no longer be involved in efforts to

teach them "literacy skills" and he sees his role in relationship to the Athabaskans as an informal representative for them to groups in the dominant culture who would interact with them (the Alaskan police department, for one, literacy conferences such as one recently held at the University of Michigan, for another).

With this consciousness of the importance of difference so central to much educational discourse, to see monolithic conceptions unquestioned is, at least, discouraging, if not downright frightening. For example, the popular move to "authorize" particular pedagogical practices under the rubric of "discourse communities" and "discourse conventions" is often seen as "empowering" students; "we" are helping "them" to be able to negotiate here in "our" universities and in the larger society. However, while agreeing with such ends, I think the rhetoric of such theory finally serves very different ideological purposes. We say to students, "'We' are the gatekeepers; enter if you're willing to pay the price." David Bartholomae writes:

> Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion -- invent the university, that is, or a branch of it, ... He has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community. (273)

Such a conception may at first glance be "helping" the student, but later we must ask helping her do what? I would argue "we" are helping her to submit to existing social/ political/ economic/

educational power relationships that do not exist primarily for her benefit. That as recently as 1985 an educator of Bartholomae's position would publish an article on beginning academic literacy written as if every student were male is surprising enough to make me wonder if it weren't a purposeful rhetorical move. (Though, I must admit, I can't imagine why he would do so.) Similarly, Bartholomae posits a univocal world (or, at least, a world of one language with several dialects), one in which it is the student's responsibility to ". . . write <u>for us</u> . . . . learn to speak <u>our</u> language. Or they must <u>dare</u> to speak it . . . since speaking and writing will most certainly be required long before the skill is 'learned'" (273, emphasis added). This explanation is an effective presentation of the "discourse community" line of reasoning, and, relatively, it is not an unfriendly one; it is even (again relatively) a "student-centered" one. Nevertheless, with such an attitude, it is not surprising that Bartholomae feels it necessary to say: "I am continually impressed by the patience and good will of our students" (274), thus virtually admitting that the faculty of the university unreasonably imposes on that "patience and good will." Am I pushing too hard? Let me read more Bartholomae. His off-hand apology is even more appropriate in light of his later definition of the university:

> Our students may be able to enter into a conventional discourse and speak, <u>not as themselves</u>, but through the voice of the community. The university, however, is a place where "common" wisdom is only of negative value; it is something to work against. The movement toward a

> more specialized discourse begins (or perhaps, best begins) when a student can both define a position of privilege, a position that sets him against a "common" discourse, and when he can work self-consciously, critically, against not only the "common" code but his own. (283, emphasis added)

The elitist and sexist connotations of such terms (of course, the students cannot speak as themselves -- who are they? -- or even in the voice of their community -- merely "common"! -- they must "define a position of privilege" that allows them to lord it over the "common," even themselves) may be accidental, unintended, but they are are almost inescapably implied by such a rule-based pedagogy. As Anne Ruggles Gere reminds us, "[d]iscussion of difference entails consideration of subjugated discourses" (1),. and by implication the reverse must be true as well: the failure to discuss difference -- i.e., to see all students as male[1] with a single privileged position to be gained in the university -- entails ignoring subjugated discourses and participating (unwittingly or purposefully) in the treatment of ". . . others that have been silenced, excluded, or held back" (Gere, 1), a la Helene Cixous and many others.

Against this "discourse conventions" railroad job, fortunately, there are other positions available, positions which acknowledge and

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[1] In the context of the mid-1980s in which feminist criticism of such usage was widely present, to use a "generic" male pronoun throughout an article cannot be simply ignored; it is at best benighted.

whole-heartedly encourage the "discussion of difference" in constructive ways. The university is a different place for writers/teachers such as Donald Murray. Murray call s for the university to value highly the driving personal ("common") codes that Bartholomae disdains:

> In *Notebooks of the Mind* (U of NM P, 1985), . . . Vera John-Steiner documents the importance of obsession. "Creativity requires a *continuity of concern*, an intense awareness of one's active inner life combined with sensitivity to the external world." Again and again she documents the importance of allowing and even cultivating the obsessive interest of a student in a limited area of study. I read that as the importance of encouraging and supporting the exploration of the autobiographical themes of individual students -- and the importance of allowing ourselves to explore the questions that itch our lives.
>
> I do not think that we should move away from personal or reflective narrative in composition courses, but closer to it; I do not think we should limit reflective narrative to a single genre; I do not think we should make sure our students write on many different subjects, but that they write and rewrite in pursuit of those few subjects which obsess them. (73)

Murray's conception of writing (and of reading as well, as his conclusion indicates [74]) is that it is all autobiographical; thus, for Murray, all literacy education is itself, and is moving toward,

continual exploration of the relationships between the individual student and the wider worlds surrounding her. He would, I'm sure, echo Helene Cixous when she writes of women:

> . . . there is, at this time, no general woman, no one typical woman. What they have *in common* I will say. But what strikes me is the infinite richness of their individual constitutions: you can't talk about *a* female sexuality, uniform, homogeneous, classifiable into codes -- any more than you can talk about one unconscious resembling another. Women's imaginary is inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing: their stream of phantasms is incredible. (280)

And Murray would certainly agree with Nancy Sommers, director of the writing program at Harvard (though he might chide her for not going far enough), who said in a paper presented at the University of Michigan, "all writing is personal." She was speaking in defense of personal narratives as a valid source of meaning for students engaged in constructing their own lives, academic and otherwise, and as a valid avenue for writing instructors desiring to foster engagement, critical thinking, and progress as writers in their students (all terms we can see as active in the on-going debates over what "academic literacy" is or should be).

However, I take Sommers's admonition in a broader sense. To proclaim to an academic audience, "all writing is personal," is to call for reevaluation of our assumptions about all communicative stances, especially those traditional academic modes that require an impersonal, detached, "objective" voice that speaks as if from the

heavens. Or if not from the heavens, it speaks at least from an earthly place of unquestionable authority -- or so it would have us believe; it is the voice that Ursula LeGuin calls "the Father Tongue" (3) and that numerous feminist writers have characterized as embodying the oppressive nature of contemporary institutions. Though Sommers is speaking here to question the pedagogical assumptions and practices in the field of composition, the act of challenging the dominant forms of accepted academic discourse in such a way opens the door to challenging the entire hierarchical structure as well as its validation of some ways of knowing and its marginalization of others (such as Bartholomae's?). Perhaps Sommers would deny her questions reach quite so far, but I believe the underlying questions of "who defines acceptable discourse?" and "how is it defined?" are exactly that challenge of the status quo. And they are exactly the sorts of questions we need to be asking about what and why we are going to institutionalize as valorized "writing curriculum." Nancy Sommers's point is implicitly that the kinds of writing student writers in composition classes are encouraged (allowed) to produce has been artificially limited because of short-sighted bias -- to the detriment of both the student and the effectiveness of our writing programs. Grant that point and it is not far to the realization that a bias against personal narrative may not be the only way in which our academic expectations have kept us blind to our own and our students' possibilities. We must value our students' lives in all their complexity and contradiction; we must value their purposes, their perspectives, their texts if we hope to convince them to value ours.